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What It Means to Be Number Two

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For more than thirty years, the U.S. and the Soviet Union have remained each other's principal adversary, superior to all other nations in military might. During all these years, their armed forces have never met in battle and their nuclear arsenals have remained locked in a standoff.

These impressive continuities have encouraged ways of thinking about military power that are now firmly entrenched in the West—habits of mind resistant to changing facts and contrary evidence. The military relationship between the two superpowers is seen as essentially symmetrical and stable. Each side must simply preserve the capability to "retaliate" with a devastating nuclear strike should the other launch a nuclear attack. Provided this requirement is met, not only will the nuclear confrontation remain deadlocked, but—so it is thought—the superpowers will be unable to use their conventional military forces against each other.

This comforting military faith holds that a global military stalemate has been preserved and will be preserved, as if through a law of nature, establishing a tense but essentially stable situation in the world. According to this widespread view, changes in the two sides' forces will cancel out or be of no decisive consequence. If the Russians have developed bigger missiles, we have added far more nuclear warheads; if the Russians build more tanks, we benefit from the Chinese divisions that tie down Soviet forces; if Soviet military spending is consistently higher than ours, we maintain a lead in technology.

Unfortunately, changes in the military balance are not controlled by some mysterious gyroscope. Neither history nor present trends support the notion that only harmless fluctuations occur in the U.S.-Soviet power relationship. The reality is that the military balance since the end of World War II has shifted dramatically in different periods. There have been three distinct phases.

First, from 1945 until 1951, we were substantially weaker than the Russians in terms of ready land-based power because of our hasty unilateral disarmament after the war and our low defense budgets throughout the late 1940's. In the first few years of our "nuclear monopoly," we had scarcely any ready nuclear weapons. Despite our vast undamaged industrial potential (which at that time was still invulnerable), our land forces in being were weak—as evidenced by the fact that we almost failed to prevent the conquest of South Korea in 1950.

In the second phase, which began as a result of the North Korean attack, our relative position was much improved. Overnight, we tripled our defense budget and embarked on a military buildup, exploiting our technical advantage to the hilt, particularly in air power and nuclear weaponry. While the Russians continued to maintain far larger land armies, our strengthened air and naval capabilities enabled us to project our power virtually everywhere outside the Soviet empire.

The third phase began in the mid-1960's, as the war in Vietnam became a debilitating drain on our economic and moral energies. Our budgets for strategic forces declined year after year, as did those for conventional land forces and the Navy, except for the bulging effort required for the war in Indochina. This decline has finally leveled off in recent years. But even today, our defense budget in constant dollars is less than it was in 1961. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has been increasing the resources devoted to its military establishment by 4 to 5 percent every year, thus about doubling its military budget, in real terms, during the last fifteen years.

The reality, in short, is that the two superpowers have not been fixed in an equilibrium during the postwar years. And the third-phase shift in the Soviet Union's favor is still under way, with no limits visible for its reach and consequences. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks cannot by themselves alter the basic situation. If the U.S. is not already militarily inferior, it soon will be.

EXCERPT:

There is no cheap and easy way to counter the dangerous trends in the global military balance. No single remedy will be sufficient.

One remedy that will *not* transform the present adverse trends—at least not by itself—is arms control. In the past, we hoped that our military rivalry with the Soviet Union could be halted by the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. But the path of negotiations has been strewn with many rocks and few accomplishments. Soviet arms programs proved so difficult to pin down in agreements that we became tempted, some fifteen years ago, to make our own programs the effective target of arms-control policy. Arms control, we reasoned, like charity, should begin at home.

In support of this policy, the theory was propounded that the Soviet arms programs were merely a reaction to ours and that if we practiced restraint, the Russians would follow suit. But while we curbed and canceled some armaments, the Russian buildup continued unabated. Our experiment in unilateral restraint ended in sad failure. The tragedy is that the pursuit of arms control has now become more difficult and more dangerous precisely because we have frittered away our margin of safety.

As President Carter discovered in the spring of 1977, Moscow will flatly reject proposals to cut back Soviet and American missile forces to the same level. Having reduced our strategic budget year after year since the early 1960's, we are now told by the Russians that it is unfair to ask them to give up some of the advantage that our self-restraint let them acquire. Given this attitude, the kind of agreements that seem within reach today cannot halt the present adverse trends. The CIA believes that the continuing increase it projects for Soviet military spending would not be significantly altered by the new SALT agreement.

The author, formerly director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, is now a consultant on national-security affairs. He contributed "What to Hope For, and Worry About, in SALT" to the October, 1977, FORTUNE.